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### Gimme One Reason To Stay Here: Analyzing Retention and Persistence Trends for First- Generation Students in the GLCA Through a Financial Lens

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**Gimme One Reason To Stay Here: Analyzing Retention and Persistence Trends for First-  
Generation Students in the GLCA Through a Financial Lens**

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## Introduction

“Failing wasn’t an option for me,” Keith Stanford attests to his time as a first-generation student.<sup>1</sup> His sentiments hint at a large injustice within the post-secondary education system. Even with greater pushes for a more equitable education system there is still one group of students that is disproportionately negatively impacted by the admissions search process and the overall collegiate experience. The financial barriers that come with being a first-generation student extend beyond collegiate acceptance and into collegiate retention and community identity. A study done looking at first-generation students who dropped out while in good standing<sup>2</sup> found that the top two reasons students identified for not completing their degree were related to financial pressures. This paper seeks to identify some of the financial barriers experienced by first-generation college students. Focusing on both the enrollment experience and the continued retention, I will explore the experience for first-generation students that exist within the Great Lakes College Association (GLCA). An empirical analysis of the financial barriers first-generation students may experience will result in the development of a model for the recruitment and retention of first-generation students in schools like DePauw University.

The reality for so many first-generation students (FGS) is that failure cannot be an option, the stakes are far too high. For FGS, college serves as an escape and a step-out of their home conditions. While failing out of college is not the goal for any student, FGS face an intense pressure to bring themselves and their families out of poverty.<sup>3</sup> In Chapter 1, I will further explore who are FGS and what makes their conditions unique. As Keith Stanford said, the option

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Standford, personal communication, October 19 2020

<sup>2</sup> Good Standing is defined as, “[FGS students who] had completed half the credits needed for a degree within the last 10 years before leaving without a credential.” (Bausch et. al, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> Engle & Tinto, 2008

of failure is nonexistent for students who hope to create a better future for themselves.<sup>4</sup> Time is of the essence as the United States Federal Aid program is limited to four years of aid in the undergraduate realm<sup>5</sup>. This means that even a rough semester or a reduced course load can heavily impact their ability to afford college.

As FGS navigate the college search process with little to no precedent for the complex nature of collegiate admissions, FGS often relying on external funds to pay for school, more so than their peers.<sup>6</sup> The sticker price of a university feels like an impossible reach, and the barrier to informational access prevents students from even engaging in the application process. The very notion of “if you have to look, you cannot afford it” has been a major barrier for many students. As students begin the college search process, they often turn down schools that could offer a higher quality or more personalized education. In addition, they struggle to understand the basic concepts associated with the financing of education. More often than not, they do not have the established family equity or fund set up for helping to pay for their degree. By the time students begin to navigate the process, it may feel like too little, too late.

The Great Lakes Collegiate Association (GLCA) is made up of 13 small, private liberal arts colleges across the United States. The average cost of these universities is a tuition, room, and board expense of around \$63,000 and a total enrollment of around 1,600 students. Below you will see a chart that details the total college cost as well as the number of students enrolled per GLCA school:

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<sup>4</sup> K. Standford, personal communication, October 19, 2020

<sup>5</sup> *How Financial Need is Determined*, n.d.

<sup>6</sup> 38% of FGS students work full-time while completing their degree compared with only 26% of their non-FGS peers (NPSAS, 2006)

<b>College</b>	<b>Tuition for one year</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>
Albion	\$ 62,970.00	1,493
Allegheny	\$ 65,670.00	1,167
Antioch	\$ 44,783.00	100
Dennison	\$ 70,400.00	2,300
DePauw	\$ 66,498.00	1,972
Earlham	\$ 59,438.00	1,000
Hope	\$ 47,590.00	3,060
Kalamazoo	\$ 62,910.00	1,451
Kenyon	\$ 73,930.00	1,730
Oberlin	\$ 75,888.00	2,195
Ohio Wesleyan	\$ 59,826.00	1,425
Wabash	\$ 60,200.00	867
College of Wooster	\$ 66,750.00	2,008

It is important to note that Antioch college is a clear outlier within the GLCA. The university, while part of the consortium, does not fit the mold of the average structure, nor does it align with the average student population. However, since it is a member of the GLCA, I have still decided to include it in my dataset. While the Net Cost of tuition at the GLCA schools is less expensive for most families, a FGS may not understand the impact of merit and need based

scholarships.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, a FGS may not feel prepared to apply or receive aid, scholarships, or grants. Thus, the GLCA schools will feel out of reach based on the sticker price and a lack of marketing to support the availability of need and merit based aid.

Keith Stanford confirms the knowledge gap that exists between a prospective student with a familial history of college and a prospective FGS. After studying as an FGS himself at DePauw University, Keith went on to work in the Office of Admissions at the University of Tulane. His experience in Enrollment Management lends itself to a unique perspective into the admissions process for FGS. The gap, Keith says, is more complex than one might initially assume.<sup>8</sup> In Chapter 2, we will dive into the collegiate admissions process and uncover the larger background of the informational asymmetry. While parents may be left in the dark concerning collegiate finances, students often have a slightly better understanding. “Students who may be savvier walk a fine line of respecting their parents but are a lot more knowledgeable about the process. Some of the students have the luxury of having some friends or peers with information that they have gathered,” Keith explains. His anecdotal evidence reflects empirical studies that look at students during the collegiate search process.<sup>9</sup> In the second chapter, I will explore the collegiate admissions process. In this chapter, I will focus on the differences between FGS and non-FGS priorities in the college search process. I will also expand upon resources, or lack thereof, for FGS and families in understanding the financial comparisons between universities. In addition, I will explore the “two-year trap” that is the enticing nature of a public two-year or community college and demonstrate how this model often appears to be a strong choice for FGS but can often lead them to terminate their education early.

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<sup>7</sup> At DePauw University, 90% of families receive merit or financial aid, according to the school website.

<sup>8</sup> K. Stanford, personal communication, October 19, 2020

<sup>9</sup> Miller, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008

“It is a privilege to worry about grades,” a haunting phrase that a FGS and First-Generation citizen once told me over breakfast. My friend reminded me that the FGS experience is often rooted in the need to identify and respond to fiscal need and not the academics. In Chapter 3 we will look deeper into intentional programming offered by GLCA schools and how academics can begin to supersede finances for student development purposes. It is important to note that FGS, as stated above, carry an immense burden of not failing. In the same breath, these students have a financial burden that extends significantly beyond that of their peers. Many FGS are asked to send home money or are expected to become the head of the family in terms of net income upon graduation.<sup>10</sup> These implicit understandings of success contribute to the mental burden that is so often carried by low-income FGS. While not all FGS fall within the low-income range, it is a community that is disproportionately affected by poverty.<sup>11</sup> So, as their peers study for their Communications Midterm and stress about their grade in their English course, FGS are working to make ends meet, determined to come out on top of a system that was not built for them.

According to Dave Murray, the founder of the National College Cost Center<sup>12</sup>, students are likely to have a more in depth understanding of universities and the financial aid process than their parents.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, studies also show that admissions counselors must sell parents on the value proposition of a university as much as their students. This inequitable access to understanding leads to a primary barrier in the world of enrollment management. A primary indicator of university recruitment of FGS is the accessibility of information on their website.

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<sup>10</sup> *Supporting first generation college students*, n.d.

<sup>11</sup> Engle, & Tinto, 2008

<sup>12</sup> The National College Cost Center has since been taken over by other organizations that hope to carry on its mission. While it is no longer an active organization, there are still many beneficial lessons learned from the work of Dave and his team.

<sup>13</sup> D. Murray, personal communication, October 30, 2020

Universities can make themselves more accessible by creating guides for FGS and their families online which help to break down the barriers of informational asymmetry. Chapter 4 will focus on breaking down barriers to entry and closing the knowledge gap. Much of Murray's work centers around supporting families and students from high-risk backgrounds during the collegiate search process. Murray's team worked at eliminating barriers by explaining some of the nuance of financing a postsecondary degree.<sup>14</sup> In order to maintain this work, colleges should seek to understand who the average first-generation student is, and what their background means when it comes to considering universities.

In developing a deeper understanding of the choices FGS make about their collegiate experience, it is essential to understand their demographical profile. The majority of FGS fall into the low-income category, which is likely to make college less accessible and the continuation of college even less so.<sup>15</sup> The fact of the matter is low-income students are more likely to struggle with retention and success than their wealthier peers. In addition, the majority of FGS come from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds.<sup>16</sup> Students within these demographical backgrounds are likely to face a wider variety of adversity than their peers. These two demographic indicators, in conjunction with the status of a FGS compound the complexity of the collegiate experience. The following chapter brings more nuance into understanding demographic backgrounds of FGS.

As students struggle to come to terms with the first look at finances, they may overlook the financial barriers that are yet to come and undoubtedly will permeate their collegiate experience. The cost of an education continues to rise, and for many students, specifically FGS

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<sup>14</sup> D. Murray, personal communication, October 30, 2020

<sup>15</sup> Engle, & Tinto, 2008

<sup>16</sup> Based on data from the National Postsecondary Aid Study:04 (Cominole et al., 2006)

families, the annual income is not rising with it.<sup>17</sup> This imbalance in finances is one of the many reasons that FGS pursue less traditional collegiate paths or practice more significant borrowing, which ultimately is the source of higher student loan debt. FGS are at a disadvantage not only in the search process but struggle throughout their entire collegiate experience, and even into their working years to make up the finances. The knowledge is asymmetrical, the barriers continue to grow, and the loans are increasingly available. Additionally, there is an implicit pressure to select a major that will lend itself to a wealthy career path, helping to pull the student and the family out of a negative financial situation. Chapter 5 brings these issues to light and explores how students study and prepare for life after undergrad.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I will build a model for recruitment and retention that expands upon areas of growth identified throughout this thesis. Specifically, I will suggest ways for small, private liberal arts colleges to integrate practices that support the deconstruction of financial barriers within the realms of recruitment, retention, and, ultimately, return on investment. While this is not an exhaustive list, I will seek to expand upon currently existing functions and design a model that supports FGS success throughout the collegiate experience. This includes recommendations based on student development models put forth by Higher Education institutions, developing a broader approach to accessibility within the realm of higher education, and meeting students where they are in terms of their collegiate experiences. I will lean on currently existing models and courses for this portion as well as develop my own components based on my research.

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<sup>17</sup> *Supporting first generation college students*, n.d.

This thesis seeks to determine the financial barriers to success for FGS looking at both the recruitment and retention model. While I will look at research on FGS as a whole to better understand the demographics, I will focus in on the GLCA to look at academic equity within DePauw and similar surrounding colleges and universities. Utilizing a series of interviews, empirical evidence, and larger demographic understanding, I will develop a profile of FGS and how they fit into the collegiate experience. I hypothesize that, despite pushes to increase diversity during enrollment management and admissions, universities will fall short on retention and intentional programming that supports the financial well-being of their students.

## Chapter 1: Understanding the First-Generation Student

While there is no one-size fits all model for FGS, there are a few characteristics that permeate different demographics. Understanding the FGS is essential in breaking down their behaviors during the college search process and in considering their needs as an enrolled student. FGS come from different familial backgrounds and have experienced different levels of education attainment within their friend groups.<sup>18</sup> So, even within the FGS community, there is a disparity in the amount of knowledge received. However, there are certain demographic markers that are more likely to appear in FGS who are looking to enroll in a college or university.<sup>19</sup> Understanding these key markers is essential within the context of this paper because it constructs the reality of many first generation students. Additionally, it provides context into positionality and both explicit and implicit financial means. It is important that higher learning institutions are able to discern student need, and develop intentional proactive and reactive measures based on these levels of determined need.

According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, FGS are more likely to be females from minority backgrounds, non-native English Speakers, have dependent children, and be financially independent from their parents.<sup>20</sup> The latter two demographic patterns speak directly to the financial instability faced by FGS. 38% of low-income<sup>21</sup> or FGS have dependents compared to only 14% of their not low-income and not first-generation peers. Additionally, FGS are also more likely to be single parents – 30% of low-income FGS are single parents while only 4% of their not low-income and not-FGS peers are. The financial strain brought on by dependent

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<sup>18</sup> Miller, 2007

<sup>19</sup> National Postsecondary Student Aid Study:04 (Cominole et al., 2006)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Low income is defined as “family income below \$25,000 because this is approximately the cut-off at which students lose eligibility for the Federal Pell Grant and TRIO programs.”

children<sup>22</sup> is a burden that their peers are less likely to face. Not only does this financial strain impact collegiate options, it impacts the student's ability to attend courses, live in residential living-learning communities, and is a long term and continual strain in the need for a job in addition to coursework.

In addition to being 2.7 times more likely to have dependent children, 74% of FGS are considered independent students<sup>23</sup> when applying for college.<sup>24</sup> Not only does this mean that they are more likely to navigate the collegiate search process by themselves, but they will also apply for the FAFSA under independent status.<sup>25</sup> For students who fall under this category, they will use their own assets to determine their Expected Family Contribution (EFC). While the exact determinant of the EFC relies on multiple variables, both dependent students and independent students without dependent children are expected to contribute 20% of their total assets as per the guidelines listed by the Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA). The FAFSA, which is used as the federal standard of aid, does the FGS no favors by assuming that independent students are able to liquify and mobilize 20% of their assets for higher education tuition expenses.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, while it is likely that students filing under an independent status are likely to have a lower EFC<sup>27</sup>, thus receiving more aid, they are also responsible for all additional payments, such as health insurance and non-university related housing.

In addition to the demographic markers listed above, FGS are more likely to attend a college closer to home, thus limiting their options for pursuing postsecondary education. On

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<sup>22</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average family spends around \$12,000 annually per child.

<sup>23</sup> Filed their tax financially independent from their parents as a result of age or as determined by the court.

<sup>24</sup> Based on NPSAS:04 survey (Cominole et al., 2006)

<sup>25</sup> Engle, & Tinto, 2008, p. 8

<sup>26</sup> *How Financial Need is Determined*, n.d.

<sup>27</sup> Pilgrim, 2020

average, a student who is both low-income and first-generation will attend only 87 miles from home.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, a student who is either low-income or first-generation is likely to attend an institution within 116 miles of their home. On the contrary, a student from neither a low-income nor the first in their family to attend college will travel an average distance of 201 miles from home. This anecdotally connects with the messages I received during interviews with FGS. They generally described a need to be close to home or able to return should something happen. As a non-first-generation student, proximity to home was not a consideration for me. I looked at collegiate fit and school size, knowing that I could utilize emergency funds and take a flight home if necessary.

Within the FGS community, students are more likely to feel a responsibility to home than their affluent peers<sup>29</sup>. For this reason, more FGS attend part-time and work a full-time job to help offset the cost of attending a higher learning institution; 63% of FGS work over 20 hours per week during the school year compared to 42% of non-FGS. They are also more likely to select different institutions than their peers. Students who are low-income FGS are more likely than students without these same identifying risk factors to attend, or at least begin their post-secondary experience with an associate's degree from a two-year institution. In fact, according to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), "the majority of low-income first-generation undergraduates, 75 percent, begin their studies at two-year and for-profit institutions."<sup>30</sup> What makes this data even more harrowing is the underrepresentation of FGS in public and private four-year institutions, where they make up only around 17 percent of the population. These students are overrepresented at two-year and for-profit institutions, which in

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<sup>28</sup> For the purpose of this study, low-income students are students with a familial income below \$25,000 as listed on their applications for federal aid.

<sup>29</sup> Blackwell & Pinder, 2014

<sup>30</sup> Engle, & Tinto, 2008, p. 8

turn negatively impacts the gap between these groups. Of FGS starting college in 2003, 52% went to two-year and 21% went to a for-profit school. Alternatively, of non-FGS 35% went to a two-year college and only 4% went to a for-profit school.<sup>31</sup> Students from affluent backgrounds consistently travel farther and obtain degrees younger and at a quicker rate than their FGS counterparts.<sup>32</sup>

In an interview that I conducted with Oliver<sup>33</sup>, a FGS and sophomore at DePauw, he echoed the above sentiments. Oliver lives with 116 miles from home. He shared that he never took into consideration the possibility of attending a university out-of-state. When asked why he did not consider schools further away from home, he shared that a lot of it boiled down to price. Oliver shared that he was worried about the explicit costs of education – he said that he believed out of state schools to be more expensive than their in-state counterparts. Additionally, Oliver said that there were other costs associated with attending a school far away. For example, he was concerned about transportation and how he would be able to get to and from school. He was also worried about housing and food security if he were to be too far away from home.<sup>34</sup>

In our interview, Oliver also explored some of the familial aspects of his college choice decision. He said that he felt as though, as the oldest child, there was a certain level of obligation that fell on his shoulders. To him, going in-state just felt easier; “There is a strong sense of familial connection. If I was to go out of state or go somewhere far, to some degree, my parents would joke that it seemed like I didn’t want to be with them anymore.” But the feeling of being needed at home did not just stop with a desire to be close by, Oliver felt as if he were responsible

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<sup>31</sup> Based on NPSAS:04 survey (Cominole et al., 2006)

<sup>32</sup> The average not low-income nor FGS will enroll at age 20, compared to an average age of 23 for a low-income FGS

<sup>33</sup> Names have been changed for anonymity

<sup>34</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2020

for completing certain tasks. His family is primarily Spanish speaking and they relied heavily on him to help translate important documents and information. Additionally, one of his parents is unable to drive, and so he felt as though he needed to be close by. While Oliver identified that DePauw feels like a great fit for him, he was undoubtedly limited in the options with which he felt comfortable.<sup>35</sup>

The National Center for Education Statistics has laid out seven key factors that contribute to students stopping-out or dropping-out of a higher education institution. These factors include: delaying entry into postsecondary education after high school, attending part-time, working full-time while enrolled, being financially independent from parents, having dependent children, being a single parent, and having a GED. As I discussed above, many of these factors are more likely to be found amongst FGS. In addition, FGS are more likely to experience a co-morbidity of these factors. Given the interrelated nature of these factors, it is perhaps unsurprising that they often present themselves as multiples. However, of students who are from low-income and first-generation backgrounds only 14% of them did not have a risk factor identified above. The majority of students within this category, 21%, had three of the risk factors. Students who are either low-income or first-generation had a 27% rate of students with no factors while 50% of students who are not low-income nor FGS had zero factors (NCES).<sup>36</sup>

Not only do risk factors such as the ones outlined by the National Center for Education Statistics contribute to further financial hardships, they also present themselves as challenges to persistence amongst the FGS community. The more risk factors a student has, the more likely they are to experience attrition from postsecondary education and higher education in general. As

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<sup>35</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2021

<sup>36</sup> Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 9

stated earlier, FGS are more likely to begin their higher education career in two-year and for-profit colleges. About 26% of low-income and first-generation students who attended a for-profit institution did not enroll in a second year of college and after six years of study, 59% of these same students attained a certificate or associates degree while 0% of them went on to attain a bachelor's degree. Only 3% of their peers experiencing only either coming from a low-income background or being first-generation attained a bachelor's degree after beginning their career at a for-profit institution.<sup>37</sup> While these students may go on to seek a bachelor's degree or other form of continued education, students who elect to attend a for-profit institution are unlikely to seek a degree from a GLCA university. For the purpose of this thesis, we will exclude students attending for-profit institutions and trade/vocational schools from the target demographic of FGS.

While GLCA schools are among the best types of institutions for degree-seeking FGS in terms of graduation rates, it is important to note that they often overlook this demographic since they are less likely to enroll as traditional college students. Low income, first generation students are 760% more likely to attain a bachelor's degree if they first attended a private four-year institution rather than a public two-year college.<sup>38</sup> All of the universities in the GLCA are small, private colleges with an emphasis on a residential life component. While this experience is widely noted as positive amongst scholars of higher education, it is exclusionary of non-traditional students seeking the collegiate experience. On average, students who are low-income and first-generation begin their enrollment at age 23, with low-income or first-generation students starting on average at age 22. Schools within the GLCA primarily target students who

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<sup>37</sup> Data based on six-year outcomes per the data in the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Study of 2001

<sup>38</sup> BPS, 2001

are coming straight from high school or who have a small gap within their educational timeline. Students who plan to enroll at age 22 or 23 will be too old to have the traditional college experience within the GLCA.

Additionally, students who fall into the low-income and first-generation student realm are more likely to be non-native speakers of English. Small schools such as universities within the GLCA are less likely to have resources available to help students and families translate the college search process.<sup>39</sup> While prospective students are likely proficient in English, admissions staff are typically unable or very limited in their ability to communicate with families who are non-native English speakers.<sup>40</sup> Beginning to expand upon or understand this barrier is a great first step for GLCA schools to take. It is increasingly important to be able to communicate across language barriers for families, specifically regarding the expected family contributions (EFC)<sup>41</sup>, FAFSA, and other financial aid information. Currently, only two of the universities within the GLCA have a translatable webpage for students from non-native speaking families.<sup>42</sup> It is likely that the student will become the translator, which leaves room for error and misunderstanding.

When it comes down to the specific breakdown of the average financial profile for a first generation student, several markers stand out in addressing the way in which FGS approach financing their postsecondary education. For example, FGS are less likely than their peers to look for ways to decrease or reduce their borrowing. According to Fernando Furquim, et. al., “each additional dollar in tuition expenses is associated with a higher increase in borrowing for

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<sup>39</sup> (A. Ryan, personal communication, November, 10, 2020)

<sup>40</sup> Engle & Tinto, 2008

<sup>41</sup> The Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is the amount per year that a family is expected to pay for their child’s education.

<sup>42</sup> Hope College in Michigan has 13 different language translations of their website and Denison University in Ohio has over 100 available languages

FG students than for their non-FG peers.” In their study, Furquim et. al. discovered that around 62.5% of FGS borrowed with an average of \$5,300 in their first year. Compared with their non-FGS peers, of whom 48.1% borrowed with an average of only \$4,000. Despite lower average EFCs for FGS, they were less loan-averse than their peers.<sup>43</sup> A study done in 2013 found that FGS are eight percent more likely to owe \$10,000 in student loans than their peers.<sup>44</sup>

While taking on student loans is a normal way of financing education, it is often accompanied by years of attempting to pay them back. Given the high attrition rate for FGS, it is also more challenging for them to pay back the high loans that they take out in order to finance their education. Interestingly, in addition to being more likely to take out loans, they are also more likely to attend in part-time status and stay enrolled for longer. Both of these factors heavily influence how many student loans they take out and how long they will need to pay back these loans. The high attrition rate often leads to lower incomes in the future. Students graduating with at bachelors are more likely to receive a higher income than their peers with only some or no college.<sup>45</sup> That said, FGS are more susceptible to utilizing high loans and less likely to be able to pay them back.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, “Prior research has found that parents without a college degree are less likely to plan to pay for college, prepare for the financial costs of college, or save for college.”<sup>47</sup> This financial system will likely lead to longer term debt, higher interest rates, and lower credit scores for students and families across the country, especially those who lack financial literacy and understanding of their counterparts. The borrowing strategies that FGS

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<sup>43</sup> Furquim, Glasener, Oster, McCall, and DesJardins, 2017

<sup>44</sup> Javine, 2013

<sup>45</sup> Furquim, et al., 2017

<sup>46</sup> According to Furquim, et al., FGS have a 1.6 greater odds of taking out loans and consistently take out higher amounts. (Furquim, et al., 2017)

<sup>47</sup> Furquim, et al., 2017

take part in are likely to exceed that of their non-FGS peers and serve as yet another barrier to FGS after college.

Since the FAFSA includes loans as part of its listed forms of aid available to students, it is likely, according to Furquim, et. al., that FGS may misunderstand the value of loans. Additionally, the higher borrowing that is seen amongst FGS populations is increased due to their propensity to take on multiple different loan types. Their non-FGS peers are likely to restrict their loan portfolio, however, FGS are likely to take loans when they are offered. This pattern of borrowing can be attributed to high EFCs that families are unable to meet and navigating the federal loan process as the first member of their family to do so. EFCs as listed per the FAFSA are notoriously high estimates which ultimately leaves families, specifically FGS at a disadvantage when it comes to the financial side of education.

According to researchers, the financial aid process as it currently stands is, “needlessly convoluted,” in terms of the complexity of the form itself and the end result in the clarity of aid received.<sup>48</sup> The research team goes on to suggest that this negatively impacts lower-income and FGS disproportionately. A 2017 study found that “nearly 20 percent of eligible students who attend college did not complete the FAFSA, most of whom came from families earning less than \$50,000 annually...”<sup>49</sup> This furthers our understanding that the FAFSA is a major barrier to entry and completion for FGS, who primarily fall into low-income categories. Since FAFSA is a primary means of gaining aid, it’s complex nature ends up disadvantaging the very students it could help the most.

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<sup>48</sup> Furquim, et al., 2017

<sup>49</sup> Kofoed, 2017

Given the tendency of FGS to “enroll in remedial classes, delay the declaration of a major, earn lower GPAs, and with draw or repeat classes, resulting in slower accumulation of credit over time”<sup>50</sup> in combination with a lower level of advising and lower knowledge of the collegiate process, it is clear that institutions must work harder to create and promote discussions of financing earlier on.<sup>51</sup> College often feels like a safety net, available to catch students as they struggle to get their footing. This image can be a dangerous portrayal as students accumulate loans and are unprepared with finances. While college is indeed a step between secondary schooling and the “real world,” it is important to reinforce the idea of fully focusing on coursework so as not to lose federal aid eligibility.

To summarize, the FGS is often close to home, has external familial responsibilities, and is likely to take on more loans and struggle with the FAFSA or general federal aid process. Additionally, the FGS is more likely to be successful in attaining a bachelors degree if they start and stay at a private college. Given the makeup of the GLCA, it is noteworthy that the FGS is most likely to be successful at a school similar to the profile of the consortium. While students are most likely to be successful within the GLCA, it is also among the hardest school types from an accessibility stand point. There is a great deal of cost, both implicit and explicit, associated with the GLCA consortium. In working to adjust to a growing population of FGS, GLCA schools need to understand the identifying measures of FGS.

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<sup>50</sup> Furquium, et al., 2017

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 2: The College Admissions Process and the Two Year Trap

“You will *probably* be able to afford this” proudly touts the homepage of Antioch College.<sup>52</sup> While an intentionally encouraging message about the affordability of college, the word *probably* hints at a much broader reality of not the daunting cost of college. The reality is, without aid, the schools that make up the GCLA are undeniably out of reach for most students, but specifically FGS and their families. As stated in Chapter 1, private 4 year institutions have the best graduation rates among FGS. However, they are also among the least accessible when considering total cost of attendance, the average student profile, and accommodations offered by the university. Several of the barriers faced by FGS begin before college does, which means that the admissions process is a significant component of barriers to entry. Whether its finding a way to travel to the university, a lack of understanding of the admissions/application process, or a general misconception of collegiate cost, FGS and their families have the odds stacked against them.

As prospective college students search for the school that will best fit their needs and advance their educational careers, they must balance a variety of considerations. Does this school have my intended major? How far is the drive home? Will my professors be accessible? In addition to these questions, students must consider the less glamorous financial side of academia. Dave Murray worked closely with FGS and students from low-income backgrounds started their sophomore year of high school and expanding into their senior year of the search process. His early intervention approach sought to increase the rate of postsecondary attendance of students from disproportionately low-income communities with high populations of potential FGS

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<sup>52</sup> Featured on the “About Antioch” portion of their website: <https://antiochcollege.edu/about/>

students.<sup>53</sup> Murray and his team had six contact days in total with each of the students from 5 Indiana high schools.<sup>54</sup><sup>55</sup>

Through his work, Murray found two key contributions that significantly impacted the number of students looking to attend postsecondary institutions. Murray noted that course selections shifted drastically<sup>56</sup> which came down to the change in college cost. The *College Costs Estimator*, a service offered by Murray and his team helped students to predict the amount of aid they would receive. Students with more Advanced Placement courses were not only more likely to be admitted, but were also more likely to receive aid. In addition, two of the workshops with the most significant impact on students included the *College Cost Estimator* and bus trips to visit universities. Murray's work increased the range of colleges that students were looking at, including an increased interest in GLCA schools and raised the average of African-American and Hispanic students who were college bound by 11 and 8 percentage points, respectively. The bus trips, Murray notes were among the most valuable because they eliminated a barrier many students faced. Whether students did not have the resources, know-how, or support to travel on their own, the bus trip workshops served as an eye-opening alternative that allowed them to tour the schools they were interested in.

Unfortunately, not every state, county, or school has a program like Murray's and according to the Assistant Vice President of Admission at DePauw University Amanda Ryan, universities still have a long way to go in making themselves more accessible during the admissions process. When I sat down with Ryan, she shared a common challenge among GLCA

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<sup>53</sup> Based on the 2002-2005 Lumina Foundation for Education Grant Project Profile

<sup>54</sup> Given the locations of GLCA schools and the propensity of FGS to stay closer to home, these high schools are located within prime recruitment regions of the GLCA

<sup>55</sup> D. Murray, personal communication, October 30, 2020

<sup>56</sup> Enrollment in Advanced Placement courses quadrupled over 3 years

schools in the recruitment of FGS. “Students expect a high level of personalization,” Ryan noted, “and we [GLCA Schools] don’t always have the resources to provide students with that.”<sup>57</sup>

Murray’s stats show that after partaking in his heavily personalized *College Cost Estimator* workshop with students and families, 7000 families felt like they had more options compared to only 800 who realized they had fewer options. If GLCA schools were able to provide FGS and families with the same, or similar level of personalization they would likely increase the number of students who were able to attend or felt comfortable even submitting an application. However, as Amanda noted, it is challenging to reach the level of personalization required to show students the colleges financially within reach with such a small staff population. A potential work-around that GLCA schools should consider is utilizing the consortium to reach students across the country, with an early intervention approach and a developed, personalized form of understanding familial college cost.

During my interview with Amanda Ryan, I uncovered another issue that schools have when reaching out to students. Students do not share whether or not they are FGS until they submit their application to the university.<sup>58</sup> Unless students self-disclose this information to their counselors prior, it is likely their counselor will not be able to provide the extra support needed by FGS. Amanda noted that she had not considered asking students for this information prior to their formal application. This reality of the admissions search process is incredibly limiting in terms of the number of students who receive support from the colleges they are looking at. Given the knowledge asymmetry of the collegiate search process, it is possible that students would not know to disclose this information or ask questions that may help them reach greater financial

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<sup>57</sup> A. Ryan, personal communication, November 10, 2020

<sup>58</sup> Common Application – application used by all of the schools in the GLCA among other institutions.

resources. This roadblock in the admissions process prevents mirroring the type of outreach that Murray and his team accomplished in Indiana high schools. In order to remedy these low-levels of outreach and provide prospective students with resources, universities in the GLCA should seek to increase their demographic knowledge of students once they enter the admissions pipeline. Many students enter the pipeline as early as their sophomore year of high school.<sup>59</sup> If colleges could replicate the experience of Murray’s workshops by providing information and visit opportunities, they would broaden the number of students who felt as though they were eligible to attend GLCA schools.

I interviewed a current sophomore and FGS named Oliver<sup>60</sup> who found DePauw after a student at his high school had decided to commit. He said he felt at home from the moment he set foot on campus. While Oliver’s sentiments about community were incredible, he noted that college – especially DePauw felt out of reach. When asked about his understanding of the sticker price and the feelings that he had after seeing it for the first time, Oliver laughed. He stated, “When I saw the sticker price, my jaw dropped... [long pause]... I told myself, ‘if I work hard, I’ll get enough money to cover the price. I got my financial aid package and it was going to cost \$24,000. My dad offered to pay, I don’t know where he was going to get the money. I found a scholarship and applied, the Malpas scholarship<sup>61</sup> made it possible for me to come here.” Oliver also noted that he was unaware of external options for school funding. He assumed, based on the data presented by the Financial Aid Office, that the only way to pay for DePauw was out-of-pocket.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Data according to Slate by Technolutions, an enrollment management software

<sup>60</sup> Names have been changed for anonymity

<sup>61</sup> The Malpas Scholarship is offered through DePauw to a student in Indiana from a low income household

<sup>62</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2020

Given the circumstances that students across the country are lacking the information about their EFCs and what they would actually pay to attend college, most students do not look at pricey GLCA schools for admission. Instead, they look to two-year community colleges with lower costs and closer to home. This is where students get caught in the “Two-Year Trap” of community college education. While community colleges or two-year public institutions are incredibly valid educational institutions, they leave FGS less likely to graduate and put them in a challenging financial position. Of FGS who attend public two-year colleges, 30% are expected to graduate with an Associate’s Degree while only 5% will go on to obtain a Bachelor’s Degree from a public or private four-year institution.<sup>63</sup> This is compared to non-FGS peers who are about 5 times more likely to graduate with a Bachelor’s Degree after starting at a public two-year college. Oliver shared that he had looked at a community college briefly during his college search process. He noted that he did not want to attend a community college, but it felt like an easier reality than coming up with the costs associated with a four-year institution.

The unfortunate reality is that while community colleges feel like a more accessible option for students, they lack the resources for retention and support of FGS. Six years after starting at a public two-year college 51% of FGS were no longer enrolled with no degree attainment, compared to only 31% of their non-FGS peers. Across all institution types, public two-year colleges had the lowest degree attainment at any level. It is worth noting that while only 5% of FGS will go on to obtain their Bachelor’s degree, 63% hope to obtain a Bachelor’s degree or higher upon starting at a public two-year college.<sup>64</sup> Students, specifically FGS struggle to obtain this goal when they enter the “Two Year Trap.” An unfortunate reality for students,

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<sup>63</sup> According to six-year outcomes by university first attended. Based on data from Engle and Tinto, 2008

<sup>64</sup> Beginning Postsecondary Students Study, 2001

specifically FGS is that there are not solid retention or recruitment tools utilized to attract students from two-year institutions to obtaining bachelor's degrees at a four year college.

I spoke with another first generation student at DePauw University, Lindsey<sup>65</sup>, who shared insight into her own college search process. Lindsey reiterated what empirical data had already shown, the nature of her search process had left her somewhat in the dark and she stepped into the role of being her own best advocate. When asked about the support she had received at the high school level, Lindsey laughed: “My school was for producing D1 athletes and kids who didn’t want to go to college. The counselors didn’t really talk to me.” It wasn’t until an encouraging teacher and DePauw alum reached out that led to Lindsey’s consideration of college as a real possibility. She says that class size was the biggest determining factor in finding a college fit because she knew that she was most likely to be successful if she got individual attention.<sup>66</sup>

However, these smaller colleges often came with a higher price tag. According to US News<sup>67</sup>, “The average cost of tuition and fees at a ranked in-state public college is about 72% less than the average sticker price at a private college, at \$9,687 for the 2020-2021 year compared with \$35,087, respectively.” This price increase was overwhelming to look at for Lindsey, “Talking about college finances was always triggering for me. I feel lucky that my parents have good jobs and were able to help me with it.”<sup>68</sup> Lindsey shares that because of DePauw’s small size, she was able to receive attention from them more than other schools. She notes, however, that looking back, she wishes there would have been more support offered. The

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<sup>65</sup> Names have been changed for anonymity

<sup>66</sup> Lindsey, personal communication, January 31, 2020

<sup>67</sup> Based on projections for the 2020-2021 school year (Powell & Kerr, 2020)

<sup>68</sup> Lindsey, personal communication, January 31, 2020

FAFSA and subsequent aid packages were something that were unknown to her and her family. Under the direction of her high school teacher, she was able to sit down and fill out financial aid forms. However, she wishes that DePauw, or other universities, could have assisted her with understanding the financial aid process or worked with her on filling out the FAFSA to include IRS information. Had she not had knowledgeable high school teachers, DePauw may have been out of reach for her.<sup>69</sup>

As universities seek to be more equitable in recruitment tactics, they should increase conversations around making college financially accessible. The admissions process has a long way to go in general with respect to transparency. But when thinking in regards to the financial barriers to entry, assisting students with fiscal literacy will not just provide greater support to students, but also increase university admissions numbers. FGS, like Lindsey and Oliver, are hesitant to look at colleges and universities such as schools within the GLCA because their price point seems too out of reach and their high schools are not equipped to help with university financial specifics. The secrecy of funding the university experience is a practice that weeds out potentially incredible students from early on in the process. Every student who visits DePauw sits through a thirty minute informational session and an hour and fifteen minute tour. During this time, financial aid is only mentioned once and it is only provides information on the deadline to submit FAFSA information.

In addition to a general lack of information presented about the FAFSA, GLCA schools are generally unprepared to discuss financial matters with non-English speaking or English spoken as a second language families. This was a reality for Oliver, who primarily speaks

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<sup>69</sup> Lindsey, personal communication, January 31, 2020

Spanish with his family at home. Currently, there are limited counselors, if any,<sup>70</sup> who are available to speak Spanish with families. Oliver shared that he relied on his high school, just as Lindsey did, to provide FAFSA related information. However, the process of filling out the FAFSA continues beyond the high school years. Oliver shared that he wished financial aid would have reached out to his family during the collegiate search process or could help them stay up-to-date with financial information. However, the office would be unable to communicate with his family.<sup>71</sup>

Oliver also recalled that his family did not have any information on the FAFSA but he had friends who had gone to college, which meant he had some idea of what is to come. This informational asymmetry, or imbalance of knowledge between generations, led to a shift of pressure unto Oliver. Instead of relying on his parents' tax knowledge to guide him, he was figuring it out, explaining it to them, and translating high level tax information. Simply put, the lack of standardized guidance has put an additional pressure of FGS to figure out the realm of taxes and financing college by themselves.<sup>72</sup> However, it is relatively easy to combat this asymmetry with better programming and educational measures.

A prime example of increased accessibility for FGS is addition to the university website in which there are guides to terminology and general advice for working through the admissions process. Denison University has a portion of their website dedicated to FGS, which includes key contacts and blog posts from currently enrolled FGS on a variety of topics.<sup>73</sup> Of the GLCA schools, only three offered webpages with resources for incoming or prospective FGS: Denison,

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<sup>70</sup> Information based on university websites and self-identified accessibility measures, as of April 2021

<sup>71</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2021

<sup>72</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2021

<sup>73</sup> <https://denison.edu/campus/firstgen>

Kenyon, and Oberlin. An additional three schools listed a direct office for FGS support once students were enrolled in the university: Earlham, Hope, and Kalamazoo. The addition of these resources creates a direct line for FGS to get in contact with the university and to establish a rapport with the university, knowing that some external support exists.

The accessibility of financial information will need to increase as the landscape of higher education is changing<sup>74</sup>. There has been a recent push to discuss safety features during admissions visits on college campuses<sup>75</sup>. This realm of safety and desire for security extends beyond physical and into financial needs. “Gen Z” students and their families beginning to look at institutions list safety in, and beyond, college as one of their top priorities. Students seeking this security, especially FGS, may fall into the “Two Year Trap” for fiscal reasons. A false sense of financial security at the two-year level is perpetuated by asymmetrical information and a lack of transparency and preparedness on the part of the college.

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<sup>74</sup> According to the United States Census Bureau there has been an increase in the number of FGS attending college and a decrease in the number of affluent students. This change in demographic will require a shift in the current admissions process.

<sup>75</sup> Students within DePauw University’s Admission Ambassador team met with consultants who emphasized the importance of student safety or perceived safety in all realms of campus life. (Amanda Ryan, 2020)

### Chapter 3: Stopping the Stopout, Letting Academics Supersede Finances

Getting through the door is not the only fiscal barrier that students face in college – there is continual financial pressure and ever growing student loans that have a hold on students during their time in college. As financial pressures grow and scholarship money stops stretching as far as it did in the first year, college students are in a unique position to engage in academics while also maintaining a job and worrying about both long-run and short-run financial issues. The turbulent nature of student loans and college life can result in a stopout<sup>76</sup> or dropout of college to get ahold of finances and assist with other familial financial pressures. Specifically, looking at the motivation factors, we can see that the majority of FGS attest to finances as a motivator for pursuing postsecondary education.<sup>77</sup> While this issue is not unique to first generation students, it is certainly more prevalent in their demographic. As mentioned earlier, FGS are more likely to come from low income backgrounds<sup>78</sup> than their peers.

As FGS grapple with learning the ropes to college, they are also frequently put into a position of financial distress and increased fiscal responsibility. In 2009, the National Institute for Health published an article that looked at attrition rates for FGS compared to non-FGS peers. Their study utilized regression models and factors such as funding, jobs, GPA, desire to “party,” and desire for a job after college. FGS were “more likely than were their peers to work in college and to work part-time jobs at all times during college, and they were even more likely to have full-time jobs.”<sup>79</sup> While non-FGS students are able to focus on classwork or have a reduced work-load, their FGS peers are working in and out of the classroom to stay afloat. This same

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<sup>76</sup> Stopout is defined as a student who has a 5 year or larger gap between starting and degree attainment

<sup>77</sup> Blackwell & Pinder, 2014

<sup>78</sup> Beginning Postsecondary Study, 2001

<sup>79</sup> Martinez, et al, 2009, p. 8

study found that FGS students were more likely to have a lower collegiate GPA and test scores than their peers.

While she felt as though her on-campus job may have detracted slightly from her coursework, Lindsey noted that there were also positive elements to working. Most notably, she listed a firm schedule and a good support system as positively impacting her collegiate experience. In an average week, Lindsey works about 10-12 hours in her supervisory role at DePauw. Lindsey states, “While it leaves me with less time to study, I am grateful to have a steady income and a good support system.” She goes on to say that “my team and supervisors have encouraged me to keep working hard and to look at grad schools.”<sup>80</sup> As the first student in her nuclear family to attend college and the first of her extended family to have stayed past the first year, Lindsey notes that this encouragement is extra meaningful to her. While her current role is only part-time and provides a low salary, she has already started planning for other family members to attend college. She has begun setting up a savings account for her three young nieces and nephews, “To me, going to college means getting out of my hometown; I want that for them, too.”<sup>81</sup>

Lindsey’s plan to assist her family as they begin their own college search is far from abnormal. The sense of needing to send money home is reflected in the experiences of many FGS<sup>82</sup>. This financial burden often leads to students stopping-out of college or stepping away from their courses to bolster their financial situation. While college students are in the midst of worrying about learning, the added pressure of providing for their current or future families detracts from focus on self. A study conducted in 2014 asked students to analyze their motives

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<sup>80</sup> Lindsey, personal communication, January 31, 2021

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> *Supporting first generation college students*, n.d.

for attending college. Within this study, 69% of FGS students listed “Help my family out after I’m done with college,” while only 31% of their non-FGS peers listed the same<sup>83</sup>. FGS students were more likely to be focused on community and collective care, whereas non-FGS students stated that their main focuses were rooted in growth and learning expansion. This dichotomy shows the role that finances play even in the collegiate goal development. While FGS are more likely to attend to seek financial security, their peers are attending for education.mil

Not only is this goal setting integral to understanding collegiate retention, it provides key insight into the longer term retention strategies and underlying issues. When FGS are looking at schools, they have a greater focus on security measures that will ensure that college is an available next step for them. While, again, their non-FGS peers may be more focused on collegiate fit, their counterparts are likely to feel pressure to find a school that supports their long-term financial security. While both aspects are important, finding a positive collegiate fit is a significant marker within sense of belonging and other retention markers. Students are more likely to dropout or stopout if they do not feel that they have belonging ties to their institution or place of learning. A study of stopout student completed within the realm of post-secondary education in New Jersey identified 5 reasons, ranked in order, for a faltering of student persistence<sup>84</sup>:

*“(a) competing priorities of work and family responsibilities that interfere with devoting the time or effort required to return to college,*

*(b) financial pressures that make returning to college difficult especially if previous financial holds or student loan defaults are involved,*

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<sup>83</sup> Blackwell & Pinder, 2014

<sup>84</sup> Bers & Schuetz, 2014

*(c) fear of failure exacerbated by unfamiliarity with computer and related technologies and a feeling of not belonging,*

*(d) bureaucratic obstacles such as academic holds related to poor grades in classes that may have been abandoned when the student last left college, and/or*

*(e) difficulty getting transcripts and work experience analyzed for academic credit or determining which program currently fits student needs and resources”*

While points a & b are directly related to fiscal matters, the remaining points are implicitly controlled by finances. Additionally, the identifying markers for students who may struggle with these issues are disproportionately FGS. As discussed in Chapter 1, FGS are primarily from low-income families, more likely to hold full-time jobs, and more likely to attend a community college with the intention of transferring credits. These markers, which on their own are challenging and indicative of a likeliness to stopout, are intensified due to the intersectional nature at which FGS students face these issues. Students who are impacted by multiple of the facets are likely at greater risk of not completing their education than their peers with only one or two of the identified reasons for discontinuing education.

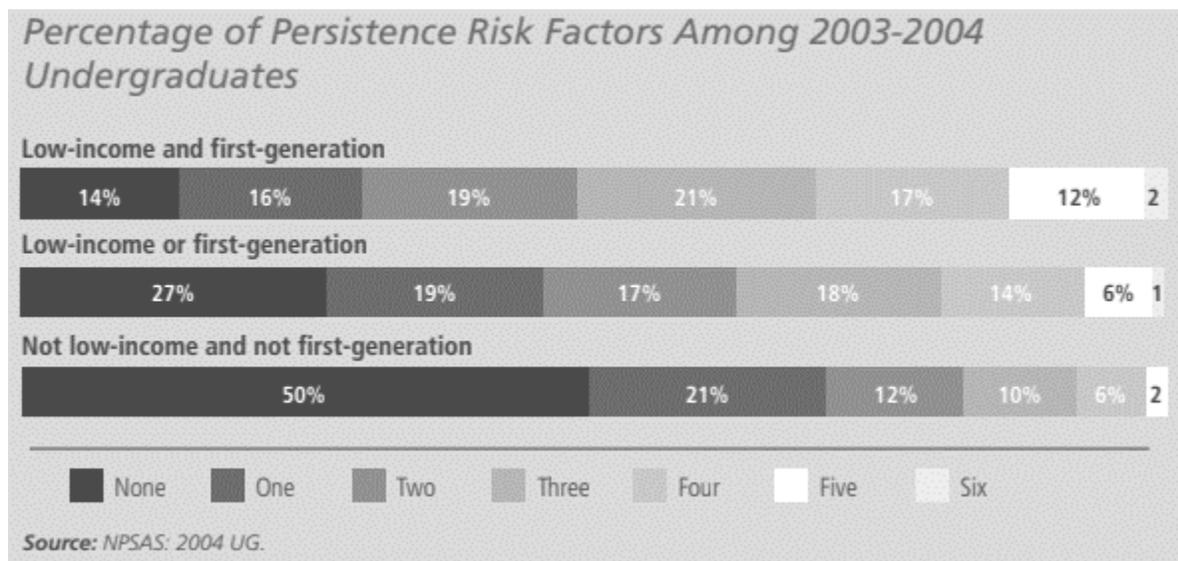
To reiterate, all of the aforementioned reasons for struggling with post-secondary persistence are heavily related to financial structures. Point C, which addresses sense of belonging and technological barriers, is often the direct result of lack of access. FGS are more likely to come from low-income school districts, who are more likely to have a lower amount of technological opportunities. Additionally, the demographics of FGS are such that sense of belonging is frequently hindered, especially for students who work full-time jobs, have dependents, or are struggling to pay for academics, let alone pay for a weekend activity with friends. Point D talks about registration holds, which may be the result of abandoned academics

or previous stopouts. Additionally, universities may put students on “financial registration holds,” which prevent students from enrolling in courses until they are able to fund their education. Again, this marker is likely to be more prevalent within the FGS community. Finally, Point E engages with the transfer student and collegiate fit. As mentioned above, FGS are more likely to focus on fiscal need than they are to concern themselves with institutional “fit” for themselves. While finances themselves are listed as a struggle, this point is multiplicative in the way that it impacts FGS. As students attempt to transfer credit from other institutions, the barriers presented by institutional guidelines may worsen the retention of FGS due to the complex nature of course requirements.

Point E is specifically interesting when it comes to liberal arts colleges. The policies for transfer credits do alter from school to school, but it is never as easy as walking in gaining credit for the same number of courses you have taken. Take, for example, DePauw University. At DePauw, students can only come in with 8 credits that can be applied toward your degree. While this ensures that the university maintains integrity, it creates a clear divide for students. At DePauw, the 8 credit policy is equivalent to two-semester for a full time student. This means that students transferring in from a two-year college will effectively “lose” a year of coursework and potentially a year of FAFSA eligibility. This combination creates an unnecessary barrier for many FGS as they attempt to utilize their two-year preparation as a means of positive financial security.

Another study of persistence risk factors was done by the National Center for Education Statistics. This study found 7 risk factors that place students at more likely rates to not complete their degrees. These risk factors are: Delaying entry into postsecondary education after high school; Attending part-time; Working full-time while enrolled; Being financially independent

from parents; Having dependent children; Being a single parent; Having a GED. While most of these risk factors are atypical of students from GLCA institutions<sup>85</sup>, they are still prevalent among some student populations. This study found that these risk factors were often interrelated, similar to the study by Bers et. al. Additionally, this study focused on the intersectionality of having multiple risk factors. The following graph shows the breakdown of student demographic and correlation between risk factors:



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The above graph shows that most low-income FGS have two or more persistence risk factors, while not low-income, non-FGS peers were at a 50% rate for having no identifiable risk factors. According to the study, “75 percent of students who started at public two-year institutions had one or more risk factors, while only 14 percent of students at four-year institutions did.”<sup>87</sup> This is likely part of the reason that GLCA schools and other private institutions have greater graduation rates than other institution types. While this could be seen as

<sup>85</sup> AVG GLCA Demographic breakdown

<sup>86</sup> Note: Reprinted from *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students*, by J. Engle, & V. Tinto, 2008.

<sup>87</sup> NPSAS, 2004

a positive for FGS attending private four year colleges, it digs at a larger issue of inequity: GLCA schools may fall among the best schools at preparing students for the future, but they are widely inaccessible, especially for the students who could benefit from their educational model the most.

While Oliver is unable to have a job on or off campus due to the requirements of his scholarship, he shared that financial considerations are constantly running through his mind. During my conversation with him, we talked about student loans and what that might mean for him. Oliver stopped the conversation and widened his eyes. He shared that with his scholarship, he had not considered the prospect of student loans. While he was aware that student loans existed, they were outside the realm of his consideration. He shared that he wished financial aid would have provided him with more information on loans and loan type, “I grew up with the notion that loans were a scary thing. That was instilled in me by parents. I really didn’t know how loans work, I get goosebumps thinking about it.”<sup>88</sup> It is not that Oliver wants to take out loans or is excited by the prospect of student debt, but that loans may have made his DePauw and familial experience a better one. “If Financial Aid reached out, I would have been so excited. I just wanted to come to DePauw and I didn’t know how to make that a reality.”<sup>89</sup>

Student finances are often a taboo topic, avoided for fear of making someone uncomfortable. However, as Oliver pointed out in his interview, providing students with options or, at the very least, a concept for making college affordable, life would have been easier. FAFSA, student loans, and payment plans are not self-explanatory for most students, specifically FGS who are navigating the process without a solid familial understanding. If universities

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<sup>88</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2021

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

addressed student concerns earlier on in the process, there is a good chance that some of the student indicators for persistence-risk factors could see decreasing rates. I will explore more information about financial literacy and FGS in the next chapter.

If we consider the realm of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular support by institution type, it is evident that students are most supported at four-year, private institutions. This is due to the very nature of high-contact support offered by faculty and staff members and the low ratio of faculty-to-student and/or staff-to-student. While it would be nearly impossible for larger, public institutions to replicate this model due to the overwhelming student population size, it is very possible that schools within the GLCA could work to make their education more accessible or at least increase the knowledge of their current accessibility. This type of small, liberal arts college, definitely addresses the needs of students, specifically as identified by Bers et al.<sup>90</sup> The nature of the liberal arts education is such that students can receive that additional support in areas of growth, such as technology or increased advising.

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<sup>90</sup> Bers et al., 2014

## Chapter 4: Intentional Programming; Closing the Knowledge Gap

This chapter will focus on three realms of intentional programming for FGS: recruitment-focused programming, retention-based programming, and financial literacy programming. While there are many ways to engage students, High Impact Educational Practices (HIEP) are among the best retention methods for students; according to educational researcher George Kuh (2008), underserved students benefit from HIEP from a “compensatory aspect” and a “grade boost.” HIEP and other intentional programs that engage students will likely improve student/family understanding, create a greater sense of belonging, and engage students with material that is pertinent to educational growth. HIEPs are among the most equitable of practices because they act as an equal opportunity for students, regardless of background, to engage in similar goals.<sup>91</sup> While they are not explicitly related to student finances, it is important to note that they are typically, though not always, of no additional cost to the student. Thus, HIEPs are an important addition to this paper because they offer opportunities for sense of belonging that are not costly. They also, according to Kuh, are directly correlated with high levels of student success and achievement<sup>92</sup>.

Taking a deeper dive into Kuh’s (literature, he notes 11 key practices that the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) has identified as positive markers of student success and retention<sup>93</sup>: (1) *First-Year Experiences*; (2) *Common Intellectual Experiences*; (3) *Learning Communities*; (4) *Writing-Intensive Courses*; (5) *Collaborative Assignments and Projects*; (6) *Undergraduate Research*; (7) *Diversity/Global Learning*; (8) *ePortfolios*; (9) *Service Learning, Community-Based Learning*; (10) *Internships*; (11) *Capstone Courses and*

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<sup>91</sup> Swaner & Brownell, 2009

<sup>92</sup> Kuh, 2008

<sup>93</sup> Kuh, 2008

*Projects.* Of these identified HIEPs, five of them directly relate to community (1, 2, 3, 5, 9), four to extra and co-curricular development (6, 8, 9, 10), and nine of them to expanding curricular knowledge (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11). The HIEPs contribute “a level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and a supportive campus environment” according to the AAC&U (2013). Once again, considering the student demographic among FGS, these identifiable areas of growth via HIEPs provide a sense of security and fit to students who are otherwise disconnected from the collegiate experience. While studies show that FGS and non-FGS need similar senses of belonging for retention/persistence, they also found that FGS sometimes felt unable to find this sense of belonging on their own accord due to other responsibilities or financial barriers.<sup>94</sup>

Additionally, this understanding of HIEPs can and should help students identify collegiate fit. According to Kuh and the AAC&U, students should engage in a minimum of 2 HIEPs to experience high levels of persistence<sup>95</sup>. Given the sense of imposter syndrome that most FGS experience, it is imperative that universities are able to provide two HIEPs that are collective and mandatory within the first year of study. Earlier, I stated that Liberal Arts institutions were among the top fit for students in terms of return on investment and collegiate persistence rates. HIEPs undoubtedly positively contribute to that general message. The following chart shows the HIEPs within GLCA schools and distinguishes the required components (R) from opt-in components (O) for students. Schools not offering the HIEP are have a filled in section. Information was obtained via collegiate websites and graduation requirements as set by respective registrars. I also looked in to core course curriculum for collaborative projects, writing

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<sup>94</sup> (Eitel & Martin, 2009).

<sup>95</sup> Kuh, 2018; AAC&U, 2013

intensive nature, and global learning. For the purpose of “Common Intellectual Experiences,” I looked for courses taken by the whole school or common reads:

School	First Year Seminar	Common Intellectual Experiences	Learning Communities	Writing Intensive Courses	Collaborative Assignments	Undergraduate Research	Diversity/Global Learning	Service Learning	Internships	Capstone
Albion	R	O	O	R	O	O	O		O	
Allegheny	R	R	O	O	R	O	O	O	O	R
Antioch				R	O	O	O	O		R
Denison	O	R	O	R	R	O	O	O	O	O
DePauw	R			R	O	O	R	O	O	R
Earlham	R		O		O	O	R	O	O	R
Hope	R	O		R	O	O	R	O	O	R
Kalamazoo	R	R	O	O	O	O		O	O	R
Kenyon	O	R		R	R	O	O	O	O	R
Oberlin	R		O	R	O	O	O	O	O	R
Wesleyan	R	R	O	R	O	O	R	O	O	R
Wabash	R	R		R	O	O	O	O	O	R
Wooster	R	R		R	O	O	R	O	O	R

An early identifier for success that FGS note is perceived collegiate fit and success within their first college course.<sup>96</sup> Theoretically, we should expect to see higher rates of retention of FGS at universities with First Year Seminars (FYS). Here we can see a positive correlation between schools with greater numbers of HIEPs and Graduation Persistence. Similarly, we can see a positive correlation between schools with FYS or First-Year Experience programs and

<sup>96</sup> Conefrey, 2018

retention after year one (Y1). These correlations are on par with the expectations presented in other studies and empirical analyses of data. The following chart shows data based on 2016 reports:

School	Retention: After Y1	Persistence: 4 year
Albion	79%	43%
Allegheny	82%	76%
Antioch	59%	59%
Denison	89%	80%
DePauw	89%	75%
Earlham	80%	56%
Hope	88%	74%
Kalamazoo	90%	70%
Kenyon	93%	82%
Oberlin	91%	76%
Ohio Wesleyan	81%	57%
Wabash	87%	75%
College of Wooster	86%	74%

As stated earlier, Antioch is an outlier within the GLCA for its small population (around 100 students). However, its retention and persistence data is along the lines of what we could expect, given Antioch's low level of HIEPs. It is anticipated that students who attend Antioch

will likely feel a lower sense of community<sup>97</sup>. While this is true for all student populations, it is especially so for FGS who are identified as needing stronger community connections. While Denison has a relatively high retention and persistence rate, students who take the optional First-Year seminar requirement are more likely to retain from the first to the second year of schooling; students who partake in the seminar have a year over year retention rate of over 90%, which is slightly higher than the university average.<sup>98</sup> This backs up Conefrey's<sup>99</sup> original point that students who engage in a first-year seminar style course are more likely to feel connected to the university. Unfortunately, there is no public data from Denison on the breakdown between FGS and non-FGS who opt-in to university offered first-year experiences. However, if we assume that there is an equal or similar demographic breakdown in both, there is higher institutional satisfaction among students in the first-year seminar program. GLCA schools who are seeking to better support their FGS population are likely to see higher retention results with the introduction of required first-year seminars.

Oliver says that he relies on University Programming to help him feel connected to a community at DePauw University. He shares that he is grateful for the programs that he found that helped him connect with his peers and detach from some of the financial burdens that he may otherwise feel in social activities. As the research shows, Oliver indicated that his First-Year seminar was an incredible way for him to feel connected to the campus. He also expressed that taking part in essential HIEPs, such as service learning and off-campus study, made him feel at home, "I felt like I was leaving behind my community. If my community isn't here, I will create it. I was able to fill the gap of familial connection with different ones in Greencastle."<sup>100</sup> Oliver's

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<sup>97</sup> Conefrey, 2018

<sup>98</sup> Based on Denison's data for their advising circles (<https://denison.edu/academics/support/advising-circles>)

<sup>99</sup> Conefrey, 2018

<sup>100</sup> Olviver, personal communication, February 21, 2021

sentiments once again echo the data that FGS seek community and often find it within HIEPs. A potential problem that Oliver, like Lindsey, addressed was a feeling of imposter syndrome.

Oliver shared that he wished he would have known how to utilize university resources earlier on in his journey. Programs like academic peer-tutoring and the academic resource center became quintessential to Oliver's collegiate well-being. Since Oliver relies on the maintenance of his scholarship rather than income supplied by a job, these resources almost became like a work position for him. Oliver felt an immense pressure to utilize these resources so that he could stay within the margins of grade assigned by his scholarship. Oliver stated, "I'm always on the go and I feel this constant pressure to be on the go and studying. Now that I'm going here, I don't want to transfer. But I never want to worry, will I be here next semester."<sup>101</sup> Intentional HIEPs, including ePortfolios that assist students with capturing all of the work they have done in the co-curricular realm and collaborative assignments, will positively support FGS like Oliver who rely on that academic programming as a way to stay afloat in college.<sup>102</sup>

External to HIEPs, schools can – and should – begin developing or revamping financial literacy programs targeted specifically to FGS. As aforementioned, there is a knowledge gap or barrier between FGS and non-FGS as it relates specifically to financial literacy. While getting to college and aid are a significant barrier, once in college students are open to a whole other world of financial responsibilities. For example, students are often introduced to varying loan types, peer-to-peer interactions with a fiscal component, credit cards, credit scores, and income. Often, FGS struggle to manage the varying amounts of income and the financial barrier and knowledge gap widens.<sup>103</sup> General data shows that there is a grave gap between students from lower

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<sup>101</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2021

<sup>102</sup> Swaner & Brownell, 2009

<sup>103</sup> Eitel & Martin, 2009

socioeconomic groups, such as FGS, and their peers. Additionally, financial knowledge, or lack thereof, was listed as the primary stressor and reason for stopping out of school for FGS.<sup>104</sup> When colleges are considering their programming types, it is important to include financial literacy. In fact, it is crucial to not only student understanding, but also to retention and persistence.

A study cited by Yorke & Thomas shows that financial literacy was ranked third among FGS, behind English and Math. However, students sought information in advance for English and Math but waited until a financial error had occurred to begin developing financial knowledge.<sup>105</sup> This strategy sets students up for poor credit and weakened financial situations; student stopouts can be directly attributed to a lack of financial literacy. Yorke & Thomas demonstrated that, via the financial literacy program Jump\$tart<sup>106</sup>, FGS were behind their collegiate peers and only slightly above their high school peers. It was also determined via a regression analysis that the primary reason for FGS financial literacy growth beyond high school could be attributed to age and trial and error. While these are certainly important factors, the analysis underscores a more problematic conclusion: the system of higher education is not engaging FGS with financial literacy or fiscal preparedness.

According to Eitel and Martin<sup>107</sup>, “many FGS” also noted that financial aid received from their university was not just an academic staple but imperative to basic necessities such as food and water. The participants also identified that they felt particularly vulnerable to financial stress without the financial management knowledge that their peers seemed to have. In this particular study, in which all participants were female FGS, “Only one participant reported using a

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<sup>104</sup> Yorke & Thomas, 2003

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Jump\$tart is a financial literacy program and survey that seeks to analyze participants’ fiscal understanding. The study discussed in this paper was conducted in 2006

<sup>107</sup> Eitel & Martin, 2009

management system that included budgeting, saving, and long-term goals.”<sup>108</sup> While financial literacy is certainly not the end all be all of solving the fiscal constraints faced by FGS, the researcher indicates that expanding financial programming, specifically to include financial literacy components, would resolve or aid some of the stress experienced by FGS. FGS and staff seem to agree.

In my interview with Lindsey, she stated that she felt that financial literacy programs would be helpful in preparing for the future and balancing a budget. She noted that, coming into college, she felt particularly unprepared to have financial conversations with the Office of Financial Aid. She recalled feelings of anxiety and uncertainty while in her meetings. Jokingly, she shared, “My parents had the financial aid office on speed dial, that’s how much I called them.”<sup>109</sup> While Lindsey is grateful for the close attention paid by the people in financial aid, she felt as though that’s where her financial conversations start and end. Aside from a few private conversations about financial status with friends, she noted that “I don’t feel prepared for post-graduation and the money I need for that.”<sup>110</sup> While, as aforementioned, she is already saving for other family members to follow in her footsteps, she lacks the knowledge to consider saving, investing, or budgeting her money. This is a challenge for most college students, but Lindsey feels as though she is particularly behind. This is where intentional financial literacy programs become imperative. FGS experience a very real knowledge gap that precludes them from fully breaking the cycle of timidity with money.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Eitel & Martin, 2009

<sup>109</sup> Lindsey, personal communication, January 31, 2021

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

On the staff side, Amanda Ryan clearly stated that the Office of Admission or Enrollment Management could better support students during their search process.<sup>112</sup> It is undeniably hard for small, GLCA schools to engage students in financial literacy programs during their time as prospective students. There is a breadth of knowledge that needs to be communicated, and financial literacy is often replaced by conversations about fit and belonging. However, as the numbers of FGS grow in collegiate settings, financial literacy and engagement will become an increasingly important part of the collegiate experience. This is where programs, like Dave Murray's work with the National College Cost Center, become necessary. Dave's work engaged students throughout the entire college search process, starting as young as the sophomore year. In terms of efficacy, the data does not lie. Over 90% of families who took part in Dave's program felt better prepared and more knowledgeable after completing it. They also noted that they felt as though they had more options after understanding the financial aid components of college. GLCA schools, which are overall more costly<sup>113</sup>, were now seen as available to students. Meaning, investment in financial literacy is mutually beneficial for both the college student and GLCA schools.

The introduction of financial literacy into Enrollment Management is not a new process. In fact, as of 2021, DePauw University is offering more webinar and direct communication surrounding the financial options students have while looking at colleges. While some of these programs are open to all students, many of them are targeted at FGS and their families to establish an understanding of the collegiate search process before even setting foot on campus. The reallocation of resources to support prospective-student knowledge has, so far, received

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<sup>112</sup> A. Ryan, personal communication, November 10, 2020

<sup>113</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average cost of attending a public 4-year college is \$25,000 in state and \$40,000 out of state before scholarships and aid. This is compared with the average cost of a GLCA school – around \$63,000.

positive reviews. GLCA schools have not integrated the financial literacy component into their admissions websites. So, it seems that even if financial literacy courses are available, they are not publicly offered. In order to be more adaptable and inclusive of a variety of student experiences, GLCA schools should consider integrating financial literacy into their admission's process, specifically with FGS in mind.

While Murray's program could be replicated in Enrollment Management Offices across the GLCA, the education should continue once students are enrolled in the school. At this point, it is likely that the conversation would shift from filing the FAFSA or understanding college cost to larger concepts, such as student loans, credit, and budgeting. In 2008, the International Debate Educational Association (IDEA) created a manual for engaging in financial literacy courses for students. The manual asserts that "deliberative education" is a necessary component of financial literacy education. Deliberative education includes a multi-faceted approach intent on engaging a variety of learners. Specifically, they recommend engaging college learners via debate, role play, simulation, and education. Each of the facets consists of different learning outcomes that establish financial literacy in practical terms. Additionally, they recommend a segmented chapter approach in which students gain a breadth of financial knowledge but specific depth within each activity.<sup>114</sup>

While their manual lacks empirical support of its efficacy, an analysis of financial literacy education done by Matthew Martin supports their overall methodology<sup>115</sup>. Two of Martin's conclusive statements are supportive of IDEA's manual:

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<sup>114</sup> Claxton, 2008

<sup>115</sup> Martin, 2007

*“[1] Financial education programs are most effective when they are tailored to the needs of the recipient and include face-to-face time, either with a counselor or in a classroom setting. [2] Financial education programs that cover specific topics and teach skills are better than those covering more general subjects.”*

Schools that are able to utilize the deliberative education approach, or keep Martin’s findings in mind, are likely to produce learners that have a breadth of strong financial knowledge and an even better understanding of the world.

Intentional collegiate program is complex and should meet multiple components of student need. HIEPs should be intentionally utilized to create equitable community and senses of belonging among FGS. In order for this to occur, schools will need to engage with their student body and create HIEPs that do not require external cost. Among the most effective approach in retention is the FYS; schools within the GLCA that are currently missing an FYS component should seek to remedy the course expectations of their students for retention and overall student support. While it is improbable for schools to offer every HIEP, it is highly possible for them to reach every student with some type of programming. The intentionality of HIEP creation is not just relevant to the success of the individual program, but imperative in the realm of year-over-year retention and graduation persistence.

Additionally, schools should seek to expand financial literacy program in a more nuanced way. A great way for GLCA schools to improve is by offering a financial literacy component to their currently existing admissions programming. Universities and colleges are failing to adapt to new student populations, which is further isolating and creates the implicit dynamic that small, private liberal arts colleges are not for FGS. Furthermore, universities seeking to support FGS should offer more intentional financial literacy programming that meets individual learners

where they are. In Chapter 6, I will further expand upon types of financial literacy programming and include my own recommended curriculum based on empirical data for learner engagement across varying demographics.

## Chapter 5: Majors Matter: Real World Prep

“You can be a lawyer, a doctor, or an engineer. That was the triad.” Oliver succinctly stated the trend that is visible in FGS all over the country. When first asked if he felt a pressure to select a certain major, Oliver looked confused. “No,” he stated, “I felt like I could pick whatever I wanted.”<sup>116</sup> But a few minutes later, he stopped the interview and asked to come back to this question. He said that he felt as though he had experienced an implicit pressure to select a major. While his parents are incredibly supportive, he still feels as though studying to become a doctor or occupational therapist would be what would make them most proud of him. More than that, he noted, was the prospect of job need and income in the future.<sup>117</sup>

More FGS come into college with a major in mind than their non-FGS peers. This relates to a desire Oliver and Lindsey both expressed during their interviews: a concrete path. Both Oliver and Lindsey expressed a great deal of anxiety centered around the unknown. While liberal arts institutions are designed for student exploration before major selection, the reality of taking a “random” selection of courses felt like a potential waste of time.<sup>118</sup> Oliver expressed that veering from the clear path was hard to explain to his family. At the beginning of his collegiate journey, Oliver started as a kinesiology major with the intention of going to Physical Therapy school after graduation. Part way through, he had a discussion with his advisor – he no longer felt engaged by his kinesiology course work. Making the switch to Global Health was an easy decision, and one that he felt would better prepare him for his future career, but his mother felt differently. “I remember her asking me several times if I was making the right decision. She wanted me to take the clear path that we agreed on – switching out of kinesiology felt wrong to

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<sup>116</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2021

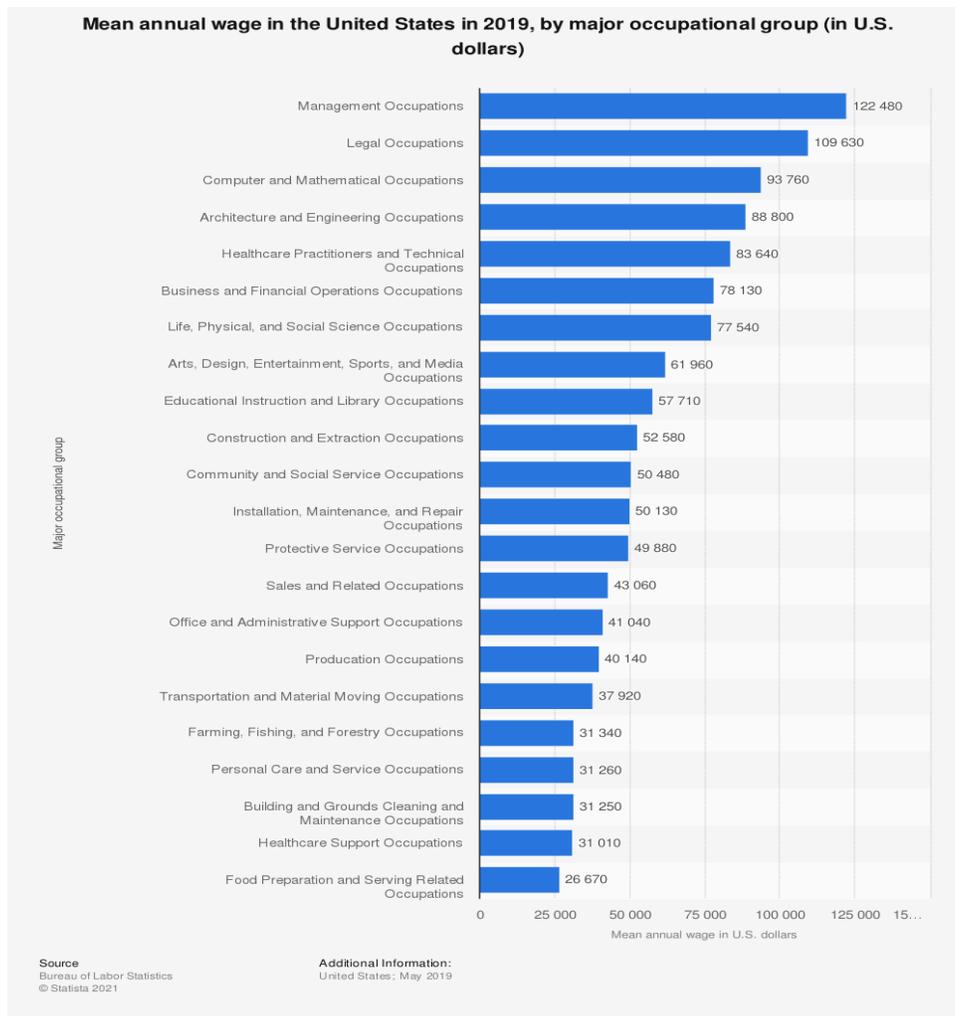
<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2021; Lindsey, personal communication, January 31, 2021

her.”<sup>119</sup> Oliver is not alone in this sentiment; FGS are more likely to keep the major they came in with than non-FGS peers.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>121</sup>Additionally, the majors that are more likely to be picked by FGS are generally associated with higher incomes. FGS are more likely to pick business and health than their non-FGS peers.

Additionally, they are equally likely to pick computer science/engineering<sup>122</sup>. The following graph shows mean annual wage by occupational groups, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics<sup>123</sup>:



<sup>119</sup>Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2021

<sup>120</sup> Engle & Tinto, 2008

<sup>121</sup> Note: Reprinted from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019

<sup>122</sup> Berkner & Cataldi, 2003

<sup>123</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019

While not every job means that someone majored in that specific area, it is evident that FGS lean toward higher earning positions than their non-FGS peers who may better grasp indirect job connections.

As FGS pick colleges, they may look to schools with strengths in these areas. Since GLCA schools are heavily based in the liberal-arts, it may be challenging to find engineering degrees. However, FGS will gravitate toward the business-type majors, such as economics, or social science majors, like political-science, that will lend themselves to higher paying job opportunities. Once again, this goes back to an ultimate desire for security and wanting to provide a certain level of financial means to their families, or future selves, upon graduating with an undergraduate degree.

When asked what graduating with a degree from DePauw would mean for them, both Lindsey and Oliver offered profound insight into their ideal life in the real world. A common theme was wanting to provide familial support; “I want to be able to take care of myself financially and give back to my parents. My parents don’t want me to worry, but I want to pay them back when I’m in a place to” was something that Oliver shared.<sup>124</sup> Lindsey also expressed wanting to help her family and provide a level of fiscal security that they might not otherwise have access to.<sup>125</sup> Additionally, they both expressed a desire to want to leave their home states. Oliver says, “For me, growing up my parents always said ‘go to school, so you have a better life, so you don’t live like us.’ So I equate education with opportunity and growth. It means I can go to grad school and pursue my dream of becoming a physical therapist.”<sup>126</sup> Lindsey echoed the same sentiment, “A college degree means a future away from the Midwest. Since I’ve come to

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<sup>124</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2021

<sup>125</sup> Lindsey, personal communication, January 31, 2021

<sup>126</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2021

college, I've changed in my political beliefs and in the kind of life I want to live. I don't click with my family as much anymore. My culture has changed."<sup>127</sup> While both students expressed a variety of meanings behind their degree, if one word could capture every sentiment, it would be: opportunity.

That ultimate desire of getting out and giving back is why real world preparation is so important, specifically within the FGS community. A study conducted by Vijay Pendakur, shows that FGS struggle more than their non-FGS peers in finding a job after graduation. Those who do, according to Pendakur are more likely to find a job external to their area of study. If we relate this back to the major selection process, a lack of clear career support can be detrimental to student financial security, especially if they have relied on major selection as the sole proprietor of determining career reality. According to Pendakur, "Many first-generation students and students of color struggle with family-related stresses in the context of career planning, which include pressure to support family members, misalignment of academic or career goals and family values, and anxiety from trying to gain approval from parents."<sup>128</sup> This directly relates to Oliver's sentiment of disappointing his mom upon changing his major.

To combat this need for familial approval, Pendakur argues for a shift in career services and career selection on the part of university officials. Specifically Pendakur states that there is a need for greater levels of identity consciousness<sup>129</sup> and self-efficacy<sup>130</sup> for FGS to be successful and feel as though they can find the career that is right for them. In her interview, Lindsey identified with this need for self-efficacy and identity. She noted that she selected a major that

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<sup>127</sup> Lindsey, personal communication, January 31, 2021

<sup>128</sup> Pendakur, 2016

<sup>129</sup> Understanding positionality and individual identity (Pendakur p. 105, 2016)

<sup>130</sup> Belief in your own abilities (Pendakur p. 104, 2016)

she was interested in – mathematics – but felt as though she was not good enough to stay in the subject.<sup>131</sup> Specifically, she noted the feeling that, “if [I had] quit, I wouldn’t have deserved to be here anymore.”<sup>132</sup> She went on to say that she felt as though she could never quit because she would not be deserving of future jobs or growth in her subject area. She expressed that these courses designed to “weed students out<sup>133</sup>” often made her feel like she was unfit for college and unable to find a career afterwards.<sup>134</sup>

This level of self-efficacy is a side effect of a larger, financial problem. FGS are likely to get into a trap of feeling as though they are not deserving or simply unable to complete their degree. Both Lindsey and Oliver mentioned that they had struggled with feeling out of place among their classmates. Oliver mentioned that he felt as though his pool of resources was significantly below that of his peers in terms of network connections and job/internship opportunities.<sup>135</sup> Much of this feeling comes from the wealth gap that FGS often experience; students from lower-income backgrounds are less likely to have connections than their wealthier peers. This demographic cross over further perpetuates the idea that selecting a wealth associated major is important. Additionally, this feeds directly into the need for more programming and collegiate offerings centered around real world preparation.

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<sup>131</sup> Pendakur, 2016

<sup>132</sup> Lindsey, personal communication, January 31, 2021

<sup>133</sup> Lindsey is referring to low-level courses with challenging curriculum

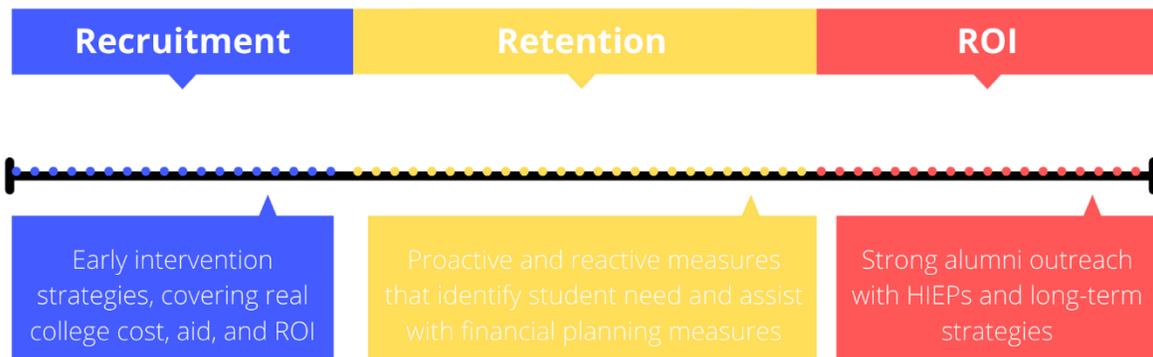
<sup>134</sup> Lindsey, personal communication, January 31, 2021

<sup>135</sup> Oliver, personal communication, February 21, 2021

## Chapter 6: A Model for More Equitable Education

Considering the financial barriers to entry, persistence, and success for FGS, I have built a model timeline based on improved methods of interaction that will engage students in three identified realms of post-secondary institutions. For the purpose of this model, I have divided the college experience into three parts: recruitment, retention, and return on investment. Based on interviews conducted, empirical data, and previous explorations of FGS experience, I believe that these three realms capture the full collegiate experience. Recruitment speaks to the admissions and enrollment management side of post-secondary institutions, retention focuses on persistence-based data that keeps students enrolled, and return on investment (ROI) focuses on the long-term desire of safety identified in several studies as a key component of FGS. This basic timeline shows a beginning understanding of intervention-based approaches to developing and supporting students during each realm of the collegiate transition.

### **Recruitment, Retention, ROI** Improving First-Generation Experience at GLCA Schools



As noted in the timeline, retention should be the heaviest focus of intentional collegiate programming for FGS with equal amounts of emphasis on recruitment and retention strategies.

While each realm is an important indicator of student success and persistence, retention is often where universities, specifically in the GLCA, fall short when supporting students.

## **Recruitment**

Early interventions and proactive measures should be the staple of the recruitment experience for FGS during the collegiate search process. The ideal model for the recruitment of the FGS would begin as early as they enter the admissions pipeline – presumably their sophomore or junior year of high school. For this recruitment technique to work, GLCA schools should seek to identify prospective student information as early as possible in the recruitment process. Instead of waiting until students fully apply to the university, universities should seek information about students earlier in the process. This could occur in the form of a student survey or informal conversation. The benefit to early identification is being able to develop a following series of interventions that do not rely on students seeking out the information but rather receiving information that could help them within their college search process earlier. This approach seeks to gain student interest in “opting-in” to receiving more info relevant to their life situation.

Once students have been identified within the pipeline as FGS, universities should begin a three-prong approach. The reality is that likely all students could benefit from this type of programming, but it is specifically relevant to FGS. Universities should work with students to determine financial aid and other aid possibilities, portray the “real” college cost as opposed to the sticker price, and begin to share the return on investment from attending the university. This approach digs at some of the earlier identified needs of prospective FGS students. It also tackles the issue of some students not receiving the information they need relevant to their collegiate experience. In terms of financial aid and other aid possibilities, by sharing information about the FAFSA earlier on during the search process, FGS will likely feel more comfortable by the time it

comes to fill out the online form. As Lindsey noted during her interview, she was unfamiliar with the terminology or concept of the FAFSA which heightened her anxiety during the prospective student portion of her admissions process. Additionally, by sharing information about merit aid and external scholarships, students who may have a “need gap” after the collegiate search will have the resources necessary to feel confident about their collegiate choice and place higher levels of meritocracy in institutional integrity rather than a purely cost-based analysis.

Finally, the recruitment process within the GLCA, specifically as we look to attract higher populations of FGS, needs to be more accessible. For example, as Oliver questioned in my interview with him, there should not be a language barrier to accessing university assistance with aid. The model for retention of the FGS would include accessibility in three parts. The first is that the university would be proactive in reaching out to the student, initiating a conversation about how to cover the gap between financial aid packages and the total cost. Secondly, it should be accessible to both students and their families in terms of language barriers and also financial literacy barriers. This may include the hiring of a translator or reallocating funds to better support non-traditional students. Finally, the recruitment mode should focus on return on investment so that families understand the difference between the cost associated with the university and the expected return.

## **Retention**

In considering retention of FGS, there should be a holistic approach to understanding the individual student and their perspective needs. If we continue with the concept of students within a pipeline, FGS should be flagged early on for personalization and targeted approaches to education. Universities should maintain balance in the areas addressed throughout this research:

intentional programming, real world preparation, and attention to need gaps that are prevalent among FGS.

In the realm of intentional programming, universities should explicitly and implicitly address financial situations of their students. In the realm of explicitly addressing student situations, universities should seek to have both proactive and reactive plans for financial literacy. In terms of proactive programming, universities should offer detailed and specific financial literacy courses that are specifically geared toward FGS. These programs should be tiered learning structures that include student engagement and hands-on approaches to engaging learners. On the reactive end, it is important to offer financial planning services. As stated in the research, FGS often rely on mistakes as their way of growing their financial knowledge. While FGS have been able to get by, offering reactive financial services to students who need assistance understanding how to move forward in a financial situation is instrumental in student retention practices.

A more implicit approach to addressing student financial need is through HIEPs that are intentionally offered and centered around free, equitable engagement for students. The average FGS struggles with financially creating community. GLCA schools are at a unique advantage in which student populations are relatively small and community can be established based on a shared location. Intentional HIEPs, such as service learning, first year seminars, and collective co-curricular engagement help students to feel the sense of belonging. This implicit form of addressing finances not only provides students with HIEPs, which are independently associated with higher rates of retention among students, but it also addresses some of the financial burdens faced by the student. GLCA schools that offered higher levels of HIEPs would benefit students in facing less monetary pressures from their peers.

In addition to HIEPs and financial planning, schools should work closely with students on determining major and career fit. Early advising in conjunction with continual advising efforts will support FGS in two ways. First, it will address the imposter syndrome that many FGS experience throughout their collegiate experience. One-on-one advising sessions will be helpful for personalization throughout the advising process. Secondly, it directly addresses basic safety concerns that FGS bear. By offering continual, personalized advising, schools are sharing resources that will allow for FGS to feel confident and secure in their future plans. This advising should be holistic, and mirror the design of the small, private liberal arts college. This is to say, schools should advise on the curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular. The introduction of e-portfolios is a helpful way for schools to assist students, specifically FGS, in grasping their on-campus impact.

A proven model for career autonomy and employment exploration is provided in Pendakur's (2016) study. The model focuses on three levels of intervention and is designed for mid-sized schools. With a few adaptations, this model could be relevant to supporting FGS at smaller to mid-sized institutions within the GLCA. The model focuses on beginning during the sophomore year and continuing with varying levels of engagement during the junior and senior years. Given the small size of the GLCA schools, I would adapt this model to include the first-year experience. This maintains the integrity of Pendakur's model while simultaneously expanding on the personalization of advising offered at GLCA schools. In the first year, students should focus primarily on identifying goals and passion areas – this macroscopic approach is missing from Pendakur's model. However, I believe that it would allow for greater efficacy levels later on, as students begin to express interest in select career paths. In the sophomore year, students can begin to learn more about the jobs that are available to them. This part of

Pendakur's study is particularly relevant, especially given the aforementioned disconnect between majors and projected career path. Additionally, students should reflect again on their skills, specifically addressing what they have learned since beginning their collegiate experiences.<sup>136</sup>

As students shift into their last two years of traditional collegiate experiences, the action steps within career development should be more meaningful. In the junior year, students should work with the career development offices for the purpose of “experiential” career opportunities, such as internships. This works well in conjunction with the HIEPs stated by the NAPSA in which internships are identified as a key component to student success and retention rates. Finally, within the senior year, FGS should be encouraged to meet regularly with a university career coach that can assist students in identifying how to utilize their culmination of experiences and educational practices in finding their next steps or next jobs. While this level of personalized advising may not seem directly related to student finances, it implicitly lifts a barrier of stress from FGS in their efforts to become first-generation professionals.

Along the same lines of advising, schools should offer support that assists students in maintaining a general focus on grades as opposed to asking students to push grades aside for financial purposes. This culture shift would likely be a culmination of continual scholarship support, offering courses on financial literacy, and offering additional services that may address student need. Because first-year students are likely to have both external and merit based scholarships, they often struggle with a greater need gap in their remaining collegiate years. If

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<sup>136</sup> Pendakur, 2016

universities could shift their endowments to support students past their first year or offer continual support in seeking external scholarships, FGS would be better financially supported.

Additionally, since so much of attrition is related to financial need, schools are seeing success with offering emergency aid programs. While some GLCA schools advertise emergency aid programs, these programs could be greatly expanded. An article by the Atlantic shows how some universities have addressed financial need crises by offering food pantries, loans for housing security, and completion-grant programs. Completion-grants assist students who are looking to stop out of college in their final semester or year. The program offers financial relief to students who have demonstrated academic commitment and risk attrition due to financial circumstances or a lack of aid. These programs are among the most supportive of FGS and offer a reprieve to students who may otherwise not be able to obtain their degree.<sup>137</sup> The adoption of these programs at schools within the GLCA would create a deeper level of accessibility for FGS and their families.

While each one of these pillars of retention is helpful in supporting FGS, it is the conjunction of offerings that will best support students. The FGS is not a monolith, and while there are key indicators and highly represented demographics, each student needs a different type and level of engagement and support. By expanding the offerings to include a wider grasp on the overall fiscal struggles, GLCA schools will be in a good position to offer support that meets the holistic needs of FGS.

## **ROI**

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<sup>137</sup> Deruy, 2016

While the years leading up to college as well as the collegiate years are essential, it is also important that GLCA schools demonstrate the strong ROI through programming. Just as with some of the other suggestions, this will increase feelings of security among FGS and allow for academics and co-curriculars to supersede financial struggles. Focus on ROI can begin during the collegiate years with the development of alumni connections and impactful HIEPs that focus on the years following graduation. Specifically, GLCA schools should focus on demonstrating how students can continue to be engaged with the university post-graduation. Allowing alumni to come back and share their educational experience is relevant to students who are seeking to understand what life may look like for them after graduation.

GLCA schools who connect students with the alumni network will center the educational financial conversation on ROI rather than on current student debt or financial struggle. Once colleges have students through the door, they should remain in the university scope. Reminding students of outcomes and their ROI for attending an institution is not just beneficial for decreasing attrition rates, but it is helpful in maintaining the alumni relationship. In this way, focusing on the long-term with FGS can become financially beneficial to the institution itself. Annual giving rates have been steadily declining, and alumni who were engaged in their collegiate experience are more likely<sup>138</sup> to give than their unengaged peers.<sup>139</sup> Colleges would be helping themselves and their students by setting up higher levels of alumni engagement.

## **The Future**

It is imperative that universities within the GLCA begin to expand their programming for FGS. From the time the student indicates interest in the school, it is important to offer continual

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<sup>138</sup> Students with high satisfaction were 10% more likely to donate than students with low satisfaction rates

<sup>139</sup> Bryant, 2016

engagement. Often, schools offer some programming during the retention portion of the education. However, outreach relevant to recruitment and ROI is lacking. Additionally, current programming and retention efforts likely are separate from financial efforts. As schools seek to address the changing landscape of education, they should focus on dynamic and meaningful efforts that will capture the latest demographic of students looking to attend higher education institutions. It is not enough to continue to rely on old recruitment, retention, and ROI habits. Schools within the GLCA have a long way to go in terms of supporting FGS and their families. Instituting this model pipeline will create an environment that is more conscientious of FGS and better supports institutional retention and ROI in the long-run.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have demonstrated who the FGS is and offered perspectives into the needs of the FGS. Through currently existing empirical studies, institutional research, and interviews, I have gathered a portfolio of data that demonstrates the successes and failures of GLCA schools, specifically DePauw, as it relates to the needs of FGS and their families. While there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to understanding the needs of FGS, it is apparent that there is much work to be done in addressing student need and shifting school offerings to better support the dynamic populations within the realm of higher education.

Perhaps most significantly is recognizing the type of student attracted to the GLCA school. While, ideally, any student could attend any university, GLCA schools are far more attractive to traditional college-aged students. This means that a good section of FGS are not looking to attend GLCA schools; students with dependent children or late starters to college are more likely to attend other universities. Future research could seek to expand upon making GLCA and small-liberal arts education more accessible to the non-traditional college student. This could mean a deeper look into university housing policies, restructuring HIEPs to fit varying student need, and addressing employment in a different way.

Additionally, future research should seek to look at retention rates specific to “special programs” within each of the schools. Many of the schools had specialized programs in which students had greater access to HIEPs and other resources. I hypothesize that students who take part in these programs, specifically FGS, will have greater levels of institutional satisfaction and will also have greater retention and persistence rates. For example, the Management Fellows program at DePauw University has a 100% retention and persistence rate for students who

complete their semester-long internship. A study could be done on retention of FGS within these specialized programs, specifically looking at a change in barriers regarding specialized access and personalization.

There is still a great need for support of FGS attending GLCA colleges and a gap of research done in specific areas of education. Specifically, there is a clear and evident lack of financial literacy support for first-generation populations on campuses. As lower-income and first-generation numbers rise in the landscape of higher education, schools should adapt to meet the needs of their populations and expand their understanding of meeting student need. As universities seek to address the needs of their students, they can begin by looking at the multi-dimensional financial barriers that present themselves to FGS. This means developing a broader understanding of the FGS, adapting the admissions process, offering financial resources, providing intentional programming, and assisting with real world prep.

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